Graffiti vandalism needs to be taken more seriously

By Federal Glover Guest Columnist/Contra Costa Times Posted: 04/01/2009 01:49:36 PM PDT

TO ONE SET OF eyes, the graffiti we see in throughout our county are works of art. To others it's a political statement fraught with meaning. To Gloria Magleby, member of the Bay Point Municipal Advisory Committee, it means scrounging up another gallon of paint and calling on her squad of dedicated volunteers in Bay Point Pride to paint it over.

Graffiti, by definition, is vandalism, straight and simple. It costs local governments thousands of dollars to paint over or scrape off walls, underpasses, fences, streets and playgrounds. At a time when every penny counts and people are losing jobs and services because of budget shortfalls, graffiti removal is far down the list of priorities.

The fight against graffiti is a fight that requires commitment and determination. After the graffiti is cleaned up, some other "tagger" comes along and makes his mark, announcing his existence or staking the turf for his gang.

The visual vandalism is not just limited to urbanized communities; it plagues cities throughout the state and shows up in suburbs like Oakley and Brentwood.

The vandalism is no small crime. It costs San Francisco \$20 million a year to remove the destructive art. "I love graffiti but there's no doubt (its vandalism)," said photographer Steve Rotman, who just came out with a photo book of graffiti. "I'm aware it does cause damage to businesses, people's homes, people's cars," he said to a reporter.

To the chagrin of property owners, they are often surprised to learn that they are responsible for painting over their fences or walls so the cost of repainting falls on their shoulders unless they have a civic-minded community group like Magleby's Bay Point Pride willing to step up.

Cleaning and replacing public property marred by graffiti vandals cost the City of San Pablo about \$300,000 last year. That's because they've taken an aggressive stance against graffiti.

But there are signs that San Pablo has turned the corner on the guerilla graffiti vandals this year, by investing in new software to help track the work of the vandals, and devoting a patrol officer to spend much of his time investigating taggers — and making their tags disappear.

"We're now able to see where they're doing it, and we're also able to establish good, fileable cases," San Pablo police Sgt. David Krastof told a Times reporter. "So far this year, we have arrested 23 of them. That's more than we did all of last year."

The city of Oakley has a goal of painting over graffiti within 24 hours of it being reported.

Bob Downing, Oakley's code enforcement officer, said that spray painting, tagging and graffiti are usually the work of kids between the ages of 13 and 18. Unfortunately, most of the time, the perpetrators are not caught and the activities go on, leaving a mess for someone else to clean up.

In September 2008, Los Angeles passed a law that would make anybody caught vandalizing personal property liable to pay for the cleanup. In addition, if the lawbreaker is unable to pay, the abatement costs will be borne by the vandal's parents.

The trick is catching the vandals. They prefer to work in the dark of night with lookouts. Even when they are seen, witnesses are reluctant to participate in their prosecution out of fear of retaliation

Oakley's taggers may just be wannabes posing as big-city gang members but there is a definitely a link to more serious crime. Los Angeles last week arrested 42 people linked to graffiti acts. More than half of them were on probation or possessed illegal weapons and drugs.

Throw in the cost of defense attorneys, and our County's own financial woes where we've had to cut personnel in the offices of the D.A. and the Public Defender, the cost of prosecution could easily surpass the couple of hundred dollars it cost to paint over the graffiti.

No wonder it is tempting to give in to a plea bargain. That's fine, said Paul Henderson, chief of administration for San Francisco's D.A.'s Office, but he is not apologizing for taking graffiti cases to court. The defense attorneys are betting that prosecutors will give into a deal rather than go to trail, Henderson said. "But I'm not going to change my position on doing the right thing when we need to hold people accountable."

Officer Troy Courtney, who was San Francisco's graffiti expert for seven years pointed out that some other cities, like Seattle, don't seem to have much tagging.

"You know why?" he asked. "Because in Seattle the first time you get caught you spend six months in jail."

Hmm ... maybe it is time we take this graffiti vandalism more seriously.